

Ship's Surgeon R. Guthrie's Account of a Calling at Rapanui aboard H.M.S. *Serengapatam* on 6 March 1830

Steven Roger Fischer, Ph.D.
Auckland, New Zealand

By 1830 Rapanui had been visited by several exploratory and merchant vessels and by an unknown number of whalers.¹ Of these doubtless scores of visits, only few accounts have survived. The calling at Rapanui on 6 March 1830 of the British forty-six-gun man-of-war H.M.S. *Serengapatam* under the command of Captain William Waldegrave is exceptional, for two reasons. First, the *Serengapatam* certainly was the largest vessel that had yet fetched up off Rapanui, an event which would have left an indelible impression on the Rapanui people. Second, there exist three eyewitness accounts of this calling. I have published elsewhere those of Captain Waldegrave (1788-1859) and Midshipman John Orlebar (1810-1891).² However, at the time of publication I was unaware that there lay deposited at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, England, the autograph journal of Ship's Surgeon R. Guthrie.³ Guthrie served aboard the *Serengapatam* for many years under Captain Waldegrave. On 6 March 1830, he also shared the *Serengapatam*'s first Polynesian calling—Rapanui—and penned the very same day a detailed account of what he experienced there. His observations comprise a rare addition to the two other accounts of this historic visit. Guthrie's account has never been published.⁴

My special thanks go to Robert Langdon for having informed me in August 1993 at the Rapa Nui Rendezvous at Laramie, Wyoming, of the existence of Ship's Surgeon Guthrie's journal. Further, I owe a particular debt of gratitude to the staff of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich for their kind attention during my research visit there in January 1994 and for their permission to publish the following extract.

I have maintained Guthrie's original orthography, but have edited the punctuation in some cases to facilitate reading.

[Entry for Friday, 5 March 1830:]

"Course N 87° W, Distance 179', Latitude 27° 17' S, Longitude 107° 11' W, Winds ENE, Thermometer 76°, 78½°, 78°: The same pleasant weather continues. Now we begin look out for land, all anxious to get a sight of the natives of these unknown Islands. Employed to day reading Johnson on the Effects of Tropical Climates. Sick List, which had been greater than since the Ship was Commissioned, begins again to be reduced to near the Original number. Easter Island at noon West 120 miles.⁵

"Saturday 6th [March 1830]. Anchored at Easter Island. Winds ESE, East, ENE, Thermometer 78, 79, 78. Hove the Ship too at 2 AM and at Daylight saw the East point of Easter or Davis' Island bearing West;⁶ bore up and made sail to

within about five miles of it, when we stood along the South side.⁷ The coast is bold and may be approached near; the island itself is a pleasant variety of Hill and plain—with numerous Volcanic mounts, the sides of which and other parts of the plain are cultivated from appearance, and agreeable to Captain Cook's report, with Sugar Cane, Potatoes (sweet), Banana trees etc. As we Sailed along the East Coast we observed the Statues,⁸ Square buildings⁹ and collections of Stones (the upper One white of the latter) as mentioned by Cook. These latter extend along the whole coast and at a distance have somewhat the appearance of persons sitting with white Caps on their heads.¹⁰ The island is perfectly free from wood, if we except a few stunted Shrubs and the Banana tree. And the high ground is covered with a green Sward which the natives cut for turf, having little else for fuel.

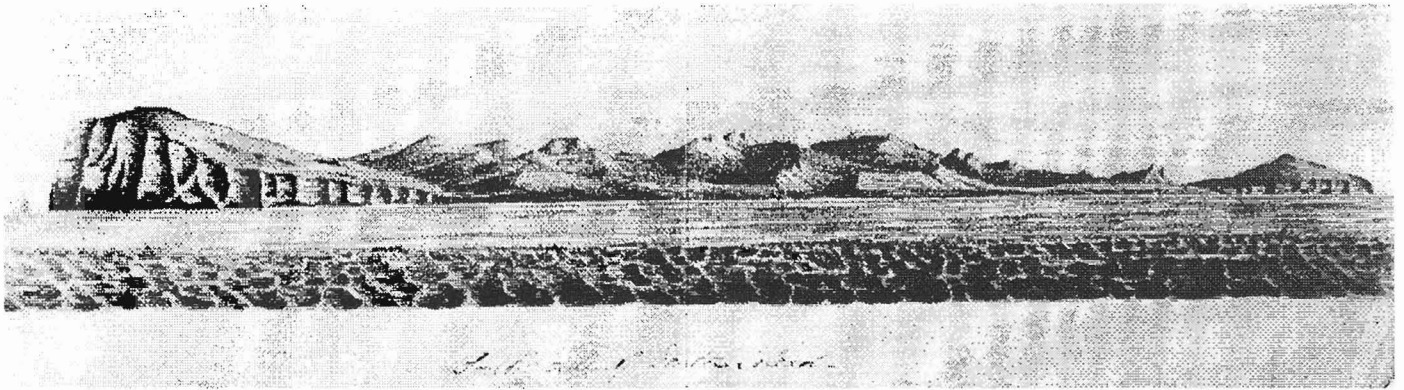
"After rounding the South point¹¹ we saw two Canoes with two people in each, quite naked—and afterwards three more, similarly manned, fishing; but observing us, they pulled in for the shore. Standing into the Bay which Captain Cook points out as the only Anchorage,¹² we observed groups of people congregating on the beach. And what surprised us more was their all being covered with a piece of cloth made fast around the neck and hanging over the back, half way down the thighs.¹³ As we had understood, they were all naked. The cloth was mostly white, but some had stained it with red clay, and was made of the Otaheite cloth plant.¹⁴ The soil seems to consist of this red clay, and many Stain their faces with it.

"About 10 AM¹⁵ we came to an anchor (After making several Short tacks) in thirty-two fathoms water,¹⁶ one mile and a half off Shore;¹⁷ the bank is very steep, as the Ship had 42 fathoms water under her with only 100 fathoms of Cable out, and a little beyond this we had no bottom with 70 fathoms. The Anchor was scarcely down when we Observed the natives Swimming off and by noon we had upwards of 150 men and women on board, and as many along side Swimming and on the Side of the ship which we would not admit on board.¹⁸ The Women were anxious to bestow favors upon us, and their men tried to induce us to comply, both using the most Significant gestures.¹⁹ The men are Copper colored, Athletic, tall and well made. I saw none under five feet eight, and I measured one who was six feet three. 5 feet 10 inches is the medium size.²⁰ In this respect we found them to differ much from Cook's description. The women and a few [of] the men are of a much lighter color. Their bodies are longer and the Pelvis narrower than those of England, or indeed in Civilized Europe; but their limbs, feet, hands, Eyes and teeth are handsome and beautiful. The men have all good teeth also, but I observed many to have one of the upper front teeth deficient.²¹ From the waist downwards, both before and

behind, the women are most tastefully and beautifully tattooed: A line along each lip, And the forehead extending to the ears, close the hairs, has a pretty tattooed border.²² Many of the old men are extensively marked in the same way on the fore part of the thighs and lower part of the body. The young have little or none, except on the lips, and they are universally black.²³ The Women have all the lobe of the Ear cut, the circumference of the hole being from an inch to an inch + half. How it is formed originally I am at a loss to account, unless by boring with a piece of bone or hard wood, which they point with a piece of Lava. In this hole they wear pieces of plantain leaf rolled up, which looks very well. The men wear their hair Short and their beards Long, though I saw a few exceptions to the latter.²⁴ The Women wear their's long and appear to hold it in great Veneration, for One who went on Shore and Sat next me in the boat, though very Amorous with me, would not allow me to cut a lock off, and it was only by Stealth I procured One.²⁵ It was about a foot long and

Captain Waldegrave did not think them worth the risking a man's life, Who did not know that thieving was a Crime.³² A woman took the Cap off a Corporal's head who was attending the side, with which she leapt overboard and was making for the shore, when a boat was sent after her. She dived several times under the boat, eluding the grasp of the crew, and ultimately managed to pass it to one of her friends so that it was lost.³³ Several lost handkerchiefs and my neckcloth was once nearly lost, as was my hat.

"When anything was given to the women, they immediately went to the gangway and gave it to one of their friends and came back begging for more; fortunately, they confined themselves to that side of the Ship which was next the Shore and saved us a great deal of trouble. We had a good deal in getting them out of the Ship, which was only effected by main force. But when once away, they never returned. "A good looking athletic fellow who got aboard first and who kept aloof from all the others by getting on the top of the



"South side of Easter Island"--An original watercolor by A. Mathews, painted at 11 a.m. on March 6, 1830, on board HMS *Seringapatam* some six miles south of Rano Kau. (Original in the possession of the Earl and Countess Waldegrave).

black, but had become of a tawney color at the ends. When this, and another One, Saw that we were about to return to the Ship, they dived overboard into the briny deep, and seemed more in their element than when with us. Both sexes that came off were entirely naked, if we except a piece of plantain leaf which the women used as a fig leaf.²⁶ Many of the men besmear their faces with a red clay, which added to their black tattooed lips and darting eyes, giving them a most ferocious appearance. Their words are uttered with great force and quickness, and their gestures are equally descriptive of impatience.²⁷ Over their loins they tie a well made bag of Straw matting about a foot Square, in which they bring off Sweet potatoes and Bananas for barter. These fruits, a few idols,²⁸ a Patapato²⁹ or Club Made of a heavy wood evidently not the produce of the island,³⁰ And a sort of clumsy hook made of two bones, were all the Articles they brought. These things they would not Sell for twice their value. Any article they fixed on, which was generally coats we wore,³¹ they stuck to and would not part with the Article we wanted for even a better. They are most expert and determined thieves; they had not been alongside many minutes before we saw a Sponge of One of the guns and a half Port made away with; it would have been easy to have got it back by firing at the thief, but

Capstan, remained and amused himself after all had left. We dressed him in a white Shirt, a pair of blue trowsers, a Straw hat and a Sergeant's Jacket, with all which he seemed much pleased but left the Ship with great reluctance in One of our boats; he pointed out the proper landing place, but while we lay too looking for a better he kept the great numbers who Swam off forward laying hold of the boat. When She [i.e., the boat] was about to return, we intimated to him that he must leave her by jumping overboard. He laid his head on his hand and used the word 'Mattee' several times, which means 'kill' in the Otaheite language;³⁴ He then left us, but had scarcely got clear of the boat when four fellows began to Strip him, and I have no doubt that before he reached the Shore he had little of his finery left. Perhaps seeing him reduced to his original nakedness would be the means of protecting him from further injury. Before anchoring, it was arranged that Captain Waldegrave, the 3rd Lieut., the Chaplain, Naturalist and myself should go on shore. The first boat however had scarcely got into the water, before she was filled with the natives, though manned and armed; Captain W. thought it would be unsafe to to [sic] go, as we would scarcely be justified in using force and perhaps killing some of them. As curiosity was our only object in visiting the Island at all.³⁵ At

two PM therefore we pulled in Shore and had a better view, when the natives to the number of 7 or 800 came down to the beach [*sic*], and hollowed and made every effort to get us on Shore; but a hard Squall with heavy rain from SW obliged us to return and we got on board at three, perfectly drenched. About 4 PM, the first and 4th Lieuts., the naturalist and myself made another attempt to Land,³⁶ by this time the natives had all left the beach and lighted their fires by the side of their huts;³⁷ but they no sooner saw the boat leave the Ship than they again flocked to the Sea Side, and a great many swam off to us, the greater half women. Only a few of the men had Potatoes and Bananas to Barter. We made a few of the prettiest of the women presents of beads, cloth, and Old clothes, with which they were much pleased. It was at this time our friend who used his authority in our favor as already described left us. One of the Officers got the figure of an Alligator or Lizard made of the same hard wood as the other figures we saw on board: the eyes of all of them are made of Vitrified Lava incircled with bone.³⁸

"Landing was very practicable at two places, but such numbers were in the water round the boat so as to prevent the crew using their oars, and if we had got on Shore we might have received such treatment from them as to induce us to use force, and such force could only consist in the use of firearms or swords by which many lives might have been lost. They all appeared frantic with joy at the idea of our landing, and shewed themselves much disappointed when they saw us pull towards the Ship. We got on board at Sunset, hoisted in the boats, weighed the Anchor, and made Sail.

Footnotes

¹See Hoorebeeck (1979:79-99) and McCall (1990:165-225).

²Fischer 1993, which includes the details of the voyage of the *Seringapatam*.

³National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, JOD 16, Journal of R. Guthrie, Surgeon aboard H.M.S. *Seringapatam*. Unnumbered pages.

⁴Ship's Surgeon Guthrie's journal is a rare source of information about many Polynesian islands in the year 1830: Rapanui, Pitcairn, Nuku Hiva, Tahiti, Mo'orea, Ra'iatea, Tongatapu and the Vava'u Group. It still remains unpublished.

⁵The *Seringapatam* was sailing from Valparaiso with the intention of first anchoring at Rapanui, then proceeding to Pitcairn and the Marquesas and further points west.

⁶Both Captain Waldegrave and Midshipman Orlebar (Fischer 1993:69,75) noted that they first saw the island at 5 a.m. on the morning of 6 March 1830.

⁷Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:69) recorded that they "ranged along the South shore at the distance of six miles" between 8 and 10 a.m. Orlebar (Fischer 1993:75) wrote that they were "running down the eastern side of [the island], at the distance of three or four miles...." Two excellent watercolors of this sail along the south shore aboard the *Seringapatam* were painted by A. Mathews, the first at 8 a.m. south of Poike Peninsula and the second at 11 a.m. south of Rano Kau; both were published for the first time in Fischer (1993:70-71).

⁸With "East Coast" Guthrie means the South Coast along which the *Seringapatam* was ranging. Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:69) specified that as they were sailing along this shore they saw a group of five statues toward the southeast end of the island, and toward the center of the shore another group of three. Both these groups were near the beach. Orlebar (Fischer 1993:75) wrote that from three or four miles out, with the aid of spy-glasses, they could see "three tall figures, which we at once conjectured to be the statues spoken of by the Dutchman who first discovered the island." Later (p.77) Orlebar reiterated "the statues we saw on the other side of the island." Herbert von Saher (personal communication, 1993) was of the opinion that in his account Waldegrave was describing the statues off the Hangaroa roadstead; but from the complementary accounts by Orlebar and Guthrie it is clear that Waldegrave, too, meant those of Rapanui's South Coast.

⁹Orlebar (Fischer 1993:75) mentioned "several low huts" close to the beach.

¹⁰These are, of course, Rapanui's well-attested *pipi horeko*, small stone cairns whose top stone was painted white as a boundary marker or *tapu* indicator. Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73) recorded that, "The division stones were black, with a white covering stone." Compare Orlebar (Fischer 1993:77): "... we observed all along the shore piles of stones, surmounted by one white pebble...."

¹¹That is, Rano Kau, which occurred after 11 a.m.

¹²Cook's Bay or Cook Bay, but now chiefly referred to as Hangaroa Bay, after Rapanui's solitary village Hangaroa.

¹³The ancient Rapanui *kahu* or *nua*; see Métraux 1940:218. Compare Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73): "On shore we observed many clothed in white or red tunics, extending in front and behind from the shoulders to the ankles." Also Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76): "On shore we observed the natives wore a loose sort of cloak or mantle, made we conjectured from the paper mulberry tree, thrown loosely over the shoulders and extending to the hips."

¹⁴They were fashioned of small *tapa* sheets that had been sown together.

¹⁵Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:69) wrote that they had rounded Rano Kau at 11 a.m. and anchored at 12:30. Since Orlebar (Fischer 1993:75) claimed that, "About ten o'clock we rounded the south point," and since Mathews timed his watercolor off the south point of Rano Kau at 11 a.m., it is probably correct that the actual anchorage took place at 12:30, as Waldegrave specifies.

¹⁶Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:69) marked thirty-three fathoms.

¹⁷Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:69,72) contradicted himself here, giving both "one half mile" and "a mile and a half from the shore."

¹⁸Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "In one hour more than two hundred of both sexes had swam on board and many others hung on to the ship's side." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:75): "We were anxious for them to come on board, but as there were nearly two hundred in the water, the captain prudently would only allow forty to be on board at a time, to effect which we were obliged to use some harshness."

¹⁹Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "The women very liberal in their favours"; also p. 73: "... the women admitted the embraces of the sailors in the most unreserved manner...." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76): "We found that chastity was not in their catalogue of virtues, but certainly, proved with us, I am ashamed to say, their best article of traffic."

²⁰Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "... about five feet six or eight inches high, one or two of six feet." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76): "The men are tall and large boned, their features plain, but possessing much animation...."

²¹This is puzzling, since Gill and Owsley (1993:57) have ascertained that the caries frequency in ancient Rapanui skeletal remains comprises 27.1, "... the highest rate known among prehistoric people." Yet in 1830 their teeth are lauded by a Scottish surgeon. In what pertains to the deficiency of the upper front teeth, this might allude to a hitherto unattested male ritual practice of tooth ablation; compare Pietrusewsky and Douglas (1993). However, Guthrie, a surgeon, writes "deficiency", not "ablation". It is not wholly clear what he means with this.

²²Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "... much fairer than the men, much tattooed covering the thighs, partially down the leg, back and waist." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76): "The women are very delicately made, of a lighter colour, pretty features, and elegantly tattooed, and would be fascinating if there was not too great a display of charms...."

²³Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "The men all tattooed on the back of the left hand, but they varied in tattooing: the neck or back and a few on the thighs." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76): "... they are of a dark brown colour and some were much tattooed."

²⁴Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "Their features malay, straight black hair.... The hair thick on the head, but little on the chin or elsewhere." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76): "The men are ... shaded with a quantity of long lank black hair...."

²⁵One must protest that Guthrie later censures the Rapanui for their "thievery". To the Rapanui, hair was something more than a mere material object: it was a part of the inviolable person.

²⁶This is the ancient Rapanui *hami*; see Métraux 1940:217.

²⁷Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "... a native man swam on board. He made a very loud noise, shouting excessively."

²⁸Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76,77): "... of the whole number that came on board, there were but two short clubs and three small carved images" and "... they had two or three small carved images, to which however they paid no reverence."

²⁹"Patapato" is probably Tahitian **patupatu*, from *patu* 'a little mallet.' In Maori, *patu* is the general name for mallets and short clubs; in Mangaian, *patu* is 'a wooden sword.' No Old Rapanui **patu* or **patupatu* with this significance has been recorded. The object Guthrie saw was probably a Rapanui *paoa* 'short, heavy, wooden club'; see Métraux 1940:169.

³⁰Guthrie is probably mistaken here; the wood was likely the indigenous Rapanui *Sophora toromiro*.

³¹Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73): "Cloth jackets and hats were the chief object of their desire." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:75-6): "... their eagerness to barter every

thing for iron or for clothes...."

³²Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:74): "As barter failed --not having any thing else to offer-- they had recourse to stealing. Every thing they saw was invaluable, the island not producing metal or timber."

³³Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73): "A cap was snatched from the head of the corporal on the gangway; the thief jumped overboard and managed to throw it from one to another till as a last resort it was thrown to a woman who, upon being persued [sic], let it sink." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:75): "... the corporal of marines lost his cap off his head, and the thief was only discovered, by the splash of water he made, as he dashed overboard, and he eluded all our endeavours to catch him, by dexterously diving, when our boat came up to him, and among the multitudes around we found it impossible to discern the thief."

³⁴Guthrie would have had access to the 18th-century Tahitian word lists, particularly those of the three Cook voyages. Tahitian *mate* is listed as 'killed, dead' and 'murdered, killed' in the 1773-1774 Forster/Anderson word list of Admiralty 55/108 (Public Record Office), pp. 271-98. In Old Rapanui, *mate* meant 'die'; its metaphorical extensions included 'faint, fall unconscious, have a strong longing for, be overcome with pain (physically and/or mentally).' In other words, their Rapanui guest was telling them, to use the vocabulary of 1830, "I am mortified."

³⁵Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "About three o'clock we compelled the natives to leave the ship. We rowed towards the beach, where were assembled near three hundred persons." Orlebar (Fischer 1993:76): "Captain Waldegrave made two attempts to land, but could not succeed from the heavy surf running on the rocky beach...."

³⁶Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "About five o'clock another party attempted to land but were prevented by the very high surf as the boat approached the shore."

³⁷The lighting of the fires suggests that this occurred about three in the afternoon when the daily 'umu' 'earth oven' was lit; it had to cook for some two hours before opening. See Métraux 1940:162 and Pollock 1993:154.

³⁸Doubtless this was a *mo'ai tangata moko* 'stylized lizard-man carving' made of *Sophora toromiro*, with obsidian pupils surrounded by bone. This is a particularly rare description of the acquisition of such an artefact. See Métraux 1940:265-6; Seaver 1993:196 and fig. 113; Forment 1993:208 and fig. 125; and Arredondo 1993:219.

³⁹Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73): "The huts were long low arches resembling a waggon tilt --a door at one end."

⁴⁰Perhaps the Rapanui were only demonstrating for the Britons that these were victuals, since all starchy foods were normally cooked before consumption in order to lessen their acidity (Pollock 1993:154).

⁴¹This is the ancient Rapanui *pora* 'float' of bulrush mats, used by both men and women for swimming and surf-riding; see Métraux 1940:208.

⁴²Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:73): "They ate pudding and meat, but refused grog, bread and biscuit."

⁴³Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:72): "We saw no trees, no animals or poultry."

⁴⁴Here Guthrie is using his native Scots English "no" for Standard English "not".

⁴⁵This is no wonder, since the Rapanui, who were used to seeing mainly small whalers, were now aboard the largest vessel that hitherto had called at the island, the forty-six-gun man-of-war H.M.S. *Seringapatam*.

⁴⁶Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:74): "Of children they appeared very fond. A woman would select a boy of fair complexion, sit by him, coax him in the most endearing manner, making presents of whatever they possessed."

⁴⁷Waldegrave (Fischer 1993:74): "A little boy of seven years old was eagerly caught and in the way to be carried on shore when stopped."

References

- Arredondo, Ana Maria. 1993. Symbolism in Rapanui Art, in Steven Roger Fischer (ed.), *Easter Island Studies: Contributions to the History of Rapanui in Memory of William T. Mulloy*. Oxbow Monograph 32. Oxford: Oxbow Books. Pp. 214-21.
- Fischer, Steven Roger. 1993. The Calling of H.M.S. *Seringapatam* at Rapanui (Easter Island) on 6 March 1830. *Pacific Studies* 16:67-84.
- Forment, Francina. 1993. "You Are Crab, Crayfish, and Octopus": Personal and Group Symbols in Rapanui Wood Sculpture, in Steven Roger Fischer (ed.), *Easter Island Studies: Contributions to the History of Rapanui in Memory of William T. Mulloy*. Oxbow Monograph 32. Oxford: Oxbow Books. Pp. 206-13.
- Gill, George W. and Douglas W. Owsley. 1993. Human Osteology of Rapanui, in Steven Roger Fischer (ed.), *Easter Island Studies: Contributions to the History of Rapanui in Memory of William T. Mulloy*. Oxbow Monograph 32. Oxford: Oxbow Books. Pp. 56-62.
- Hoorebeeck, Albert van. 1979. *La vérité sur l'île de Pâques*. Le Havre: Pierrette d'Antoine.
- McCall, Grant. 1990. Rapanui and Outsiders: the Early Days, in B. Illius and M. Laubscher (eds), *Circumpacifica: Festschrift für Thomas S. Barthel*. Lang: Frankfurt a.M., Berne, New York, Paris. Pp. 165-225.
- Métraux, Alfred. 1940. *Ethnology of Easter Island*. Bernice P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 160. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press.
- Pietruszewsky, Michael and Michele T. Douglas. 1993. Tooth Ablation in Old Hawai'i. *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 102:255-72.
- Pollock, Nancy J. 1993. Traditional Foods of Rapanui, in Steven Roger Fischer (ed.), *Easter Island Studies: Contributions to the History of Rapanui in Memory of William T. Mulloy*. Oxbow Monograph 32. Oxford: Oxbow Books. Pp. 153-7.
- Seaver, Joan. 1993. Rapanui Crafts: Wooden Sculptures Past and Present, in Steven Roger Fischer (ed.), *Easter Island Studies: Contributions to the History of Rapanui in Memory of William T. Mulloy*. Oxbow Monograph 32. Oxford: Oxbow Books. Pp. 191-200.

